

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Aquinas College
Date of visit: 19 June 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit. It focuses on the themes explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

Achievement and standards

Learners' achievements 2005/06, including progress relative to prior attainment and potential

- For 16-18 year olds learners, achievements at level 3, where there are most learners, remained high in 2005/06. Pass rates on AS courses have been above national averages for last few years and retention, although dipping in 2005/06, was still over 90%. On A level courses pass rates remained at the same levels as in 2004/05, around the national average. Overall, retention for learners on A level courses improved in 2005/06 largely due to an improvement in retention on the general studies course. Overall retention figures to date for 2006/07 show a continuation of the improving trend at level 3. Regular management information systems (MIS) reports at all levels, from college wide to individual learners, are supporting improvement strategies in this area.
- In measuring learners' progress relative to prior attainment on both AS and A level courses, data show that overall learners make at least the progress expected of them. In some subjects learners make very good progress, but in others they do less well than expected. On level 2 programmes there has been a continuation of the improvement seen in 2004/05, both in terms of increasing retention and pass rates.

At the last annual assessment visit it was noted that appropriate strategies had been put in place to support subject areas that did not perform as well as expected. What progress has been made here?

- Data show that in the majority of cases where specific strategies have been put in place these have led to a marked improvement in

performance. For example in the English department results have improved over the last three years. Module examination results in January 2007 also show significant improvements in areas where there has been targeted support. However the college is aware that performance in some subjects is still below the standard expected and focussed action plans and support are ongoing.

Quality of education and training

The successful introduction of a new 'Study Skills' programme, including insight (key skills at level 2) and AS critical thinking, is a key target in the action plan for 2006-2007. What progress has been made in this area?

- The new programme has been piloted this year and received much positive feedback. The Insight programme has worked well in developing learners' skills and the pilot has also highlighted ways in which the course could be improved, which will be implemented in the next academic year. There are a large number of learners on AS critical thinking, with high pass rates in the January 2007 module examinations, high retention rates and many learners wishing to continue the course onto a second year.
- A very high proportion of learners studying key skills IT at level 2 have already passed the test and current figures for portfolio completion are higher than at this point in previous years. Results in GCSE English and mathematics have also improved over the last two years. Those learners for whom a GCSE course would not be suitable are following literacy and numeracy courses at an appropriate level and at their own pace, taking on-line tests when they feel ready for them.

The quality of student support was judged outstanding in the last inspection and in the 2005/06 self-assessment report (SAR). What actions have been taken by the college to maintain the high standard of provision in this area and how is the college monitoring and evaluating the impact of strategies on the learner experience?

- The college has continued to develop initiatives in this area with the focus always being on the learner as an individual. Learners initial applications are thoroughly assessed so that effective advice, guidance and support can be given and strategies put in place to help each learner to succeed.

A wide range of support mechanisms are in place and learners are fully involved in deciding what support will be best for them. Support is embedded throughout the college with departments carrying out specific diagnostic assessments to find out how best to assist learners in their subject, in addition to the college wide initial assessment for all learners.

- There are robust quality assurance processes in place. Student support takes part in the overall quality assurance process, tutorials are observed, as is the work of learning support assistants in the classroom. The impact of learning support is assessed and there are specific learning support surveys for those that access support, with a section for input from parents and carers. In addition, the college wide exit survey covers questions on student support and feedback is used effectively to improve provision. The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda has a high profile and the college is working towards achieving the 'Stockport Healthy College Standard' in order to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives in this area.

Leadership and management

In considering the summary of self-assessment grades in the 2005/06 SAR, curriculum grades range from satisfactory to outstanding. What strategies are being employed to assist areas in moving up and in supporting those already with top grades in maintaining them?

- The college has a proportionate response to supporting departments in the drive to improve provision. Where departments are working well there are the usual quality systems to support them with robust quality assurance procedures which involve the use of external partners in moderation and validation. In addition, there are many college wide initiatives which help departments in maintaining high standards, such as the sharing of good practice, led by the learning and teaching group, the attendance group, the middle management development programme and the focus on retention. For those areas where performance is less than expected there is an intensive support programme, with the development of a specifically targeted action plan and support from a senior member of the quality group. Departments which have been targeted in this way have improved.

At the last AAV it was noted that, in relation to the accommodation strategy, 'the major focus was on the long term with a full rebuild planned.' In addition 'driving forward the college's accommodation strategy' is a key target in the 2006/2007 action plan. What progress has been made in this area?

- The college has devoted a great deal of time and resources to the accommodation strategy and has developed detailed plans for the new buildings and the process by which the site will be re-developed. The new building has been designed with the specific ethos of the college and the needs of the curriculum as the key drivers. Learners and staff have been fully involved in the planning process to date. The college is currently going through the final stages of the application and planning process with a projected project completion date in 2010.